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CIA chief in surprise decision to retire

From MARTIN FLETCHER IN WASHINGTON

WILLIAM Webster, the director of the American Central Intelligence Agency since 1987, surprised Washington by announcing his retirement yesterday, but it was not clear whether his departure was entirely voluntary.

Mr Webster, aged 67, gave no particular reason for his decision beyond sheer length of service and there had been

recent rumours that he might be replaced. "You have to leave, but something tells me it is a good time to leave," he told reporters, adding that he would "pursue other avenues in the private sector".

President Bush, himself a former director of the CIA, said Mr Webster had done a "superb job", but his aides have not always been so kind. *The Washington Post* ran a celebrated story in October 1989 saying that senior administration officials were increasingly frustrated with his ineffective performance and had begun talking about replacing him.

No replacement has yet been announced, but two names being touted were those of Robert Gates, the deputy national security adviser, whom Mr Bush yesterday called a "worthy man", and James Lilley, US ambassador to China.

The quality of the CIA's intelligence gathering has been questioned at various points in the recent past, most notably during the Panama invasion and after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait last August. CIA sources later insisted that the intelligence they provided was not acted on, and many insiders say CIA intelligence during the war itself was outstanding.

No date has been set for Mr Webster's retirement.